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Public Women: Gender and Urban Space in Cairo¹

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Women claiming full access to public space have incited heated debates around the world (e.g. Wilson, 2001; Secor, 2002; Phadke, 2007). In Europe and the USA, feminist activists have put women's right to public space on the agenda through actions such as take-back-the-night marches. In many cities in the global South, the stakes of being in public as a woman have similarly been high. Notwithstanding the common threads in such contestations, gendered definitions of social space differ markedly across urban landscapes. This article touches upon some of the everyday negotiations of public space, class and gender in contemporary Cairo. These Cairene negotiations of public space illustrate the profoundly gendered and classed nature of urban landscapes in Egypt, and beyond.

In early 2011 an 18-day-long uprising brought down the Mubarak regime in Egypt. It temporarily transformed Cairo's central Tahrir Square into an almost ideal counter-republic. The sense of community that resulted from a deeply felt quest for justice created a space in which the usual social fault lines and tensions had no place. Christians protected Muslims during prayer, poor and rich chanted and slept side by side. The exceptional nature of the mass protests seemed to be underscored by the strong presence of women in the square. Since both public space and politics are generally constructed as male domains, the presence of women was seen to indicate the broad base and urgency of the protests. Moreover, the absence of harassments that otherwise marked women's experiences in Cairo's public spaces illustrated to many both the utopian nature of what one could call Republic Tahrir, and the promises of the revolution.

As soon as Mubarak stepped down, much of this utopian promise dissipated, and many of the usual social fault lines resurfaced. Among other things, sexual harassment returned.

This article goes back a few years before the 2011 uprising to explore the stakes with regards to women's presence in public. It examines issues of gender and public space by focusing on the ways in which young female professionals navigated the cityscape of Cairo. What do their urban trajectories tell us about the gendered (and classed) constitution of urban landscapes?

A cosmopolitan class

In the course of 2002 I made the acquaintance of a number of high-powered upper-middle-class women in their late 20s and early 30s. These young professionals were among the most visible exponents of Egypt's new liberal age: young, sophisticated women, relatively fluent in English, who were employed in the internationally oriented segment of Cairo's economy and claimed knowledge of global trends and cosmopolitan fashions (De Koning, 2009b).

The presence of these upper-middle-class women in both professional and social public life had become normalised, even critical to upper-middle-class lifestyles, which were marked by the mixed-gender character of contacts and places. Their negotiations of space and their public performances were part of an elite class project that, on account of its continuous references to *barra*—the 'West' or the 'First World'—can be labelled as conspicuously cosmopolitan.

The safe space of the coffee shop

On a spring day in 2004, I found Amal² sharing a table with our common friend, Miriyam. Randa soon joined us. All three were professionals in their early 30s, from well-to-do families and employed in the internationally oriented segment of the urban economy. Like most of the other women at the Retro Café, they wore tight jeans and T-shirts. The small café with its art, earth tones and modern wooden furniture was designed to give a contemporary, yet warm sense of comfort and home.

Our discussion soon converged on the importance of coffee shops for women. "Coffee shops were able to gather girls from their houses and the club," Amal said. "Before, we did not have places where we could spend time after work." The overwhelming presence of women in most coffee shops indeed presented one of the striking features of coffee shop social life. In these upscale coffee shops both veiled and non-veiled women often constituted more than half of the customers. Many single professional women like Amal and Miriyam had taken to spending much of their time in coffee shops such as the Retro Café.

Since their introduction in the mid-1990s, these conspicuously cosmopolitan coffee shops have become emblematic of a young, upper-middle-class presence in Cairo's urban landscape. The US style coffee shop formula turned out to be ideally suited for the Cairene context, since it was part of global flows of distinctive cultural consumption yet was not associated with 'immoral' spaces of alcohol and subterranean sexuality such as bars or nightclubs. Upmarket coffee shops provided upper-middle-class professionals with new opportunities for socialising, finding partners and other forms of networking and self-presentation.

Coffee shops had wrested such mixed-gender social settings away from associations with immorality and loose sexual behaviour that clung to less exclusive mixed-gender spaces outside the redemptive familial sphere, and thereby offered young female professionals the opportunity of respectable public lifestyles.

The rather exclusive context of the coffee shop helped frame a woman's appearance and behaviour as upper-middle-class and thereby guaranteed that her presence in that space would be read as part of a respectable lifestyle. However, in the streets, where upmarket norms are not hegemonic,

such representations could easily be overturned. The same fashionable *cut* (sleeveless top) would seem out of place but could also be taken as a sign of disrepute and easy morals—an open invitation to comments and even harassment.

Into the urban jungle

In contrast to the closed coffee shops, Cairo's streets were largely characterised by male entitlement. The street was a space for men to inhabit, a space where they could spend time, observe and interact with passers-by, comment and flirt. Unaccompanied young women, in contrast, had a limited and ambiguous status as marginalised, and potentially illegitimate and disreputable, passers-by (see also Ghannam, 2002). They were supposed to be on their way somewhere, have a clear destination and not linger for too long. Hanging around in the streets, especially on their own, was taken as an open invitation for men to make contact.

Young women particularly were subject to constant observation and judgements. Such judgements were based on looks, class markers and signs of modesty such as veils or loose-fitting clothing. Yet each of these styles had to be negotiated across diverse spaces with differing interpretations of a woman's presence. How the tight, yet not too revealing jeans and top or the fashionable matching headscarf and loose-fitting dress would be interpreted depended entirely on socio-spatial context.

Purity and defilement were central issues in the urban trajectories of young upper-middle-class women. Concerns about women's movement focused on their unscathed passage through public space, and invoked the numerous dangers of harassment and defilement that were seen to accompany such presence in public spaces. These were invariably sexualised dangers that threatened a woman's sexual purity and respectability.

The avoidance and barring of unwanted gazes and unwarranted contact, were central features of upper-middle-class strategies regarding transportation. Two common means of transport had come to symbolise the two extremes of experience in public: the bus stood for forced proximity and possible harassment, while the car represented control, protection and absolute freedom of movement.

Gendered fears and the fragility of class

The urban trajectories of these Cairene women show us a city that is crosscut by intersecting fault lines of gender, class, age and lifestyle. They navigated the city based on experiential maps of the city that included spaces of comfort and belonging in which they expected their presence to be framed as respectable and the general public to be held to those same standards of respectability. Their maps also featured open, less class-specific spaces, such as streets, in which they knew they could not control social identifications and feared they might be misidentified.

The public presence of these female young urban professionals had become one of the most significant markers of the young upper-middle-class culture that had developed in Cairo's new leisure spaces in the 1990s. This public presence was, however, fragile and evoked severe anxieties about the possible harm that could come to female upper-middle-class bodies in the city's public spaces.

The dangers that being in public represented for the upper-middle-class female body were simultaneously symbolic and physical. Just as upper-middle-class women's reputations were easily damaged or ruined, upper-middle-class bodies were easily harmed and defiled. The sense of privilege that emanated from this female public presence as the manifestation of a conspicuously cosmopolitan class project, was thus matched by a strong sense of fragility and threat. ■

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1. This article is a revised and abridged version of De Koning (2009a).

2. All names used are pseudonyms.